

Chapter XVIII

City Managers and E–Government Development: Assessing Technology Literacy and Leadership Needs

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ABSTRACT

The development of e-government has attracted considerable scholarly interest in recent years, but relatively little has been written about the capacity to develop and provide new e-government services. This chapter seeks to add to our knowledge in this area by assessing the ability of city managers in the United States, to effectively champion e-government development. We present an analysis of scores on the technology practice of the ICMA Applied Knowledge Assessment demonstrating that city managers possess relevant knowledge, but we also find some interesting generational variations in technology literacy and knowledge about managing technology. We also examine the ability of city managers to provide leadership for e-government development and identify some important challenges. We conclude that there are limits to capacity that could delay e-government developments in the future and offer some recommendations on how to limit their impact.

INTRODUCTION

It is unfortunate, but the term e-government has come to suggest levels of ambiguity and complexity that probably produce more hesitation than

inspiration. Interesting research on perceptions of global warming has identified different “mental models” that are used by the public to reason out the impact of man on the environment (Seacrest, Kuzelka, and Leonard, 2000). They also note

that these models incorporate many surprising misperceptions. E-government inspires a similar sort of a guessing game; it presents us with a rich mix of mysterious technology, process specific knowledge, and vague claims. Professional and academic writings have provided some insights, but, certainly in the United States, public officials are left to contemplate retooling government—one risky step at a time.

E-government is not something that we can push aside and ignore, however, and this is especially true for local governments, which offer a mix of service and communication intensive activities that can and do mesh well with Internet technology. Progress will require developing a better sense of the rules of the game—like who is responsible and the skills that professional leaders will need. We need leaders who can make the most of e-government opportunities, and this is going to take focused effort. The first step is to acknowledge that Internet technologies are changing the parameters of local government in important ways. Further actions would then involve incorporating e-government into the local government management profession in a meaningful way.

The goal of this chapter is to begin sorting out the different kinds of professional and leadership responsibilities that effective e-government requires. Our focus is on city managers because they tend to stay close to the leading edge of professional public management. We seek to look at e-government development from a professional perspective. What types of knowledge and skills do public managers need to develop and guide e-government initiatives? We are breaking some new ground here, but also building on a rapidly growing body of research. The role of technology in local government has not been totally overlooked at this point, but we are far from thinking about e-government as a vitally important professional responsibility. This discussion relates to developments elsewhere in the world, because the struggle to develop e-government infrastructure is a global

issue (UN, 2005). All governments seeking to enhance their e-government capacity will also need to find ways to acquire personnel with the right mix of knowledge, skills, and leadership abilities. We will start with a brief look at the e-government landscape from a local government management perspective.

E-GOVERNMENT IN A LOCAL CONTEXT

E-Government Defined

E-government can be described as encompassing all things electronic (UN and ASPA, 2001), but this is not going to serve us well. Nor can we allow e-government to become synonymous with IT (information technology). As Moon (2002) noted, e-government may *use* IT; the IT should be viewed as a means to an end. Local governments already do use a wide range of specialized knowledge and tools to assess their financial status, to hire and fire employees, provide clean water, etc. E-government does present some unique challenges, but the local government management perspective needs to be that e-government is just one of many services. The IT and geek connection has helped to make e-government a responsibility that is easy to marginalize and leave for someone else to do. If e-government is rocket science, then only rocket scientists will have e-government. Using technology to better serve citizens is a management responsibility, and we need to approach e-government from a public management perspective (Zouridis and Thaens, 2003).

The nature of e-government was aptly described by Alfred Ho (2002) when he linked it to the “reinventing government” movement (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Key goals are better service delivery, a focus on citizen needs, and community ownership. As Ho points out, Internet technologies provide ways to achieve

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